

Review of *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice* by Hilda Lloréns (University of Washington Press)

by [Donna Elizabeth Hayles](#) | [Issue 12.1 \(Spring 2023\)](#), [Book Reviews](#)

ABSTRACT This review examines Hilda Lloréns’s research into the role that Afro-Puerto Rican women play in advocating for environmental justice and building a sustainable environment in the Puerto Rican archipelago, particularly after the devastation left behind by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, and the subsequent catastrophic effects of COVID-19 in 2020. Lloréns shows that Afro-Puerto Rican women are able to survive in the face of racial and ecological discriminations and marginalizations, and their survival is emblematic of Puerto Rico’s own survival. The author devotes the entirety of her book to show that as an “ethnographer of home,” as she calls herself, it is essential for people to create livable worlds within which they can survive. Survival in the midst of catastrophic climate change is difficult, Lloréns argues, primarily because Puerto Ricans are often on the receiving end of austerity measures that make their existence tenuous, at best. These austerity measures typically come after a climatic event, and result in limited access to clean water, food, electricity, healthcare, housing, and education, which only serve to exacerbate the desperation that many on the island feel. While this desperation was widespread across the island after the hurricanes in 2017, residents in the southeastern region of the island (predominantly Afro-Puerto Ricans) were even more affected. Lloréns shows how these people used their limited resources to cull an existence out of a seemingly hostile land and create a community that sustained them. Lloréns draws on personal experiences, the experiences of her family, ethnography, anthropology, and interviews to show how vital it is to examine Puerto Rico not as a homogenous space but rather as a heterogeneous one with its unique complexities. And by centering the work and experiences of Black Puerto Ricans, Lloréns gives voice to a group that is largely left on the margins of society, but who demonstrates the importance of building community as a sustaining entity.

KEYWORDS [climate](#), [feminism](#), [colonialism](#), [environment](#), [racial capitalism](#), [justice](#), [Puerto Rico](#)

Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice.
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After Hurricanes Irma and Maria tore through Puerto Rico in a two-week span in September 2017, they left in their wake a devastated island and a people struggling to put their lives back together with the limited resources they had. Puerto Rico further made national news when then-President Donald Trump, after declaring a state of emergency in the island, visited a relief shelter, threw paper towel rolls at the crowd, and dismissively joked that Puerto Rico was an unexpected burden on the federal budget. The COVID-19 pandemic only served to exacerbate the complexity of Puerto Rico's dire situation a few years later, creating an economic faultline separating the island from the continental United States.

Hilda Lloréns's *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice* unflinchingly examines the dismissive attitude that both the US federal government and the local government of Puerto Rico adopted then—and continue to embrace now—in their treatment of the poor, primarily the large population of Black or Afro-Puerto Ricans, located in the southeastern region of the island. Lloréns's text intersects her personal experiences as a cultural anthropologist with those of Black Puerto Ricans on the island who band together to cope within the untenable spaces that they are forced to live in, as well as to create livable worlds for themselves. As they seek to come to terms with a society that marginalizes their experiences and their presence, Afro-Puerto Rican women have learned to work in solidarity to "live within [the] turbulent ongoingness" of disenfranchisement and marginalization (12). Born in Puerto Rico, but raised in Connecticut, Lloréns is laser-focused on revealing how Black Puerto Rican women's lives are tied to the survival of Puerto Rico itself. While the oppression and exploitation they face is unconscionable, their resilience allows them to endure in the face of great adversity. The author's core argument is that the devastation and dispossession that marginalized Afro-Puerto Ricans have endured is fodder for their strength, and she invites us to see the importance of building supportive communities and creating environmentally just spaces (18).

Lloréns's methodology draws on autobiography, memories, ethnography, anthropology, interviews, and history, resulting in rich and detailed research that outlines the role Black Puerto Rican women have in advancing ecofeminist alternatives to preserving and advancing the position of the Puerto Rican archipelago and its diaspora. As an "ethnographer of home," as Lloréns calls herself, her text presents a much-needed contribution to the ongoing dialogue about Puerto Rican history, the ways in which Black Puerto Ricans are racialized, marginalized, and stigmatized, and the perpetuation of the myth of the archipelago as a drain on the resources of the US federal government. Drawing from extensive interviews and time spent in Puerto Rico—what she refers to as the scholar-

activist model—Lloréns outlines the significant contributions that the poor in Puerto Rico make to their own wellbeing, as well as that of the island. The stories that Lloréns recounts serve as evidence of the exploitation of the human and natural resources of the island that takes place, as well as the pollution that foreign entities (endorsed and supported by the local government) perpetrate on the fragile environment of the island. For Lloréns, since the dispossessed poor in Puerto Rico are the ones who stand to lose the most, they are the ones who have the most to teach in combating the “ravenous capitalist extractivism, racialized dispossession and ecocide” that dominate and continue to devastate the Puerto Rican archipelago (10).

Each chapter of Lloréns’s text presents a significant aspect of the ways Black Puerto Rican women navigate the “turbulent ongoingness” of living within the archipelago’s unstable, uncertain, and fragile ecosystem (12). Chapter 1, “Surviving Matriarchal Dispossession,” provides the reader with an examination of the fragmented geographic, political, and emotional ties that connect Afro-Puerto Rican women to the land. For Lloréns, these women’s lives are marked by a social structure she calls “dispossessed matriarchy” where their gender and race are components that contribute to their oppression and dispossession. By centering the experiences of Afro-Puerto Rican women, Lloréns challenges the ontological discourse of matriarchal dispossession.

The title of chapter 2, “Doing Home-Work in the Motherland,” establishes Lloréns as a “native” anthropologist who is keenly aware of the conflict that she experiences in exploring the history of her native country from the perspective of someone from mainland America (46). As a native anthropologist, Lloréns explores the idea of belonging and who possesses the right and privilege to tell the stories of the land. As both an insider (Lloréns was born in Puerto Rico) and an outsider (Lloréns emigrated when she was thirteen), the author is aware of the problematic space she occupies in seeking to “decoloniz[e] and undisciplin[e]” herself and her homeland from the colonizing narrative of Puerto Rico (14).

In chapter 3, “Life-Affirming Practices,” Lloréns documents the role that Black women play in advocating for environmental, racial, and climatic justice in Puerto Rican archipelagic and diasporic spaces. As the author shows, these women have been largely ignored in the emergent literature, so by centering their stories in her work, she renders them visible even as she valorizes their contributions. These women recognize the importance of community work, especially when government assistance is slow in coming after a disaster like a hurricane. Lloréns highlights the Initiative for the Eco-development of the Jobos Bay Inc, (IDEBAJO), which “created and sustained sites of resistance through community work” (86). Women such as Ismenia, Leticia, and Carmen became involved with IDEBAJO once they realized that grassroots organizations were instrumental in protecting their communities. Ismenia became active in order to share her “quality-of-life ethos” with the

children in her community (110), Leticia helped to tend the community garden so that they could be “completely self-sustaining” (110), and Carmen helped to clear the debris after Hurricane Maria struck the island (114). Lloréns contends that all women shared a belief in “the value of their work and of their communities” (111), and used their limited resources to “resist subjugation and build meaningful and sustainable lives” (88).

In chapter 4, “Living with/in Ecological Catastrophe,” Lloréns contends that unless more is done to control greenhouse gas emissions, the global community faces an ecological disaster unlike anything seen before. For Lloréns, while each part of the world has its unique challenges, the history of the Americas is one of “raciological-ecological extractive” practices that have only fast-tracked their catastrophe (124). Colonialism, extractivism, and racial capitalism have engendered an accelerated effect of a world on the verge of ecological collapse, and natural disasters, such as hurricanes and drought, are evidence of a world that is out of control. Lloréns argues here that by engaging in a “deprovincialized conceptual and epistemological excavation” (126), we can begin the painful process of “shaping a more just, livable, inclusive, and sustainable” world (161).

In the Epilogue, “A Word about Black Puerto Rican Ecological Knowledge,” Lloréns ends her book with a commentary on Black ecological knowledge, arguing that in Puerto Rico “Black ways of living and of making sustainable lives” continue to flourish in the archipelago, despite their marginalized state (163). Evidence of this survival is presented in a group of “present-day maroons” she interviewed three months after Hurricane Maria destroyed their beachfront community. Lloréns documents her interaction with them and shows how their determination and self-sufficiency allowed them to craft practices that ensured their survival. These modern-day maroons, Lloréns contends, define their success in life through their ecological knowledge and their centuries-old relationship with the land.

The primary strength of Lloréns’s book rests in the intimacy that she brings to excavating the troubling environmental injustices Black Puerto Rican women have to live under even as they struggle against marginalization. Rather than presenting a totalizing conclusion of Puerto Rico’s situation, Lloréns adopts a responsive stance to her analysis of the injustices that the residents of Puerto Rico’s southeastern region face. Her observations and conclusions can be further extrapolated to our analysis of the Global South where the effects of colonialism, neoliberal austerity measures, environmental degradation, land dispossession, gentrification, and “increasingly callous federal economic policies” continue to resonate in the precarious lives of marginalized peoples in these spaces (11). By adding her voice to those advocating for environmental justice, Lloréns encourages us to reflect on our relationship with the environment and the ways in which the world around us is “coming into being” (12).

Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice is a timely and necessary examination of the growing crisis in environmental justice and other cultural issues such as gender, race, and the effects of colonialism. Lloréns's hard-hitting truths in this cultural anthropological text expose her antiracist, ecofeminist, decolonial approach to foregrounding the experiences of marginalized Black women in Puerto Rico. By amplifying the voices of this frequently silenced group, Lloréns provides a space where they are humanized and their voices heard. For the author, people who are often forced to live on the fringes of society—who are often banished from the public sphere—are invariably the ones who are more attuned to the silent cries of the land, and who have the most to teach us about living in harmony with the environment. It is they who know how best to “survive the onslaught” of an ecologically unstable space and turn it into one that is not only sustainable but is also “more just, livable, [and] inclusive” (161).

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